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NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
May 4, 2006

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Secretive Salmon
by Senator Larry Craig

Where are the salmon? What is happening? Until late April, when spring Chinook began to arrive at Bonneville Dam, many throughout the Northwest – environmentalists, biologists, sportsmen, tribes and even newspapers – were asking this question. But within the last weeks, spring Chinook have begun the journey to the spawning grounds of the Columbia River.

On the first of May, 2,602 spring Chinook passed through Bonneville Dam. While lower than past years, the numbers have increased over 12,000 in just five days. A delayed migration also happened last year. By August 31, 2005, more than 209,000 spring and summer Chinook salmon were counted at Bonneville Dam, close to the ten-year average. However, just 75,485 made it to Bonneville Dam by May 2005. Sometimes we forget that salmon don't run on our schedule. They run on their own, so shifts in the migration shouldn't be surprising from time to time. Back in 1952, the peak of the spring run did not occur until May 27.

The lack of answers about the late run underscores what I believe is the most important aspect of the salmon recovery debate in the Pacific Northwest – the ocean. We don't know why spring Chinook are returning so late because we know virtually nothing about what they have been doing for the last five years out there.

I've been criticized recently by some for what they perceive as a lack of support for, or an opposition to, science in the salmon debate. Nothing can be further from the truth. The critics ignore the fact that I have repeatedly spoken about the need for research to address the salmon's time in the ocean, this "black box," about which we know the least.

By comparison, we know a lot about salmon in the Snake and Columbia rivers.

According to the Army Corps of Engineers, adult fish ladders have been very successful in allowing fish to swim past the dams, even though sea lions eat more and more each year. In fact, adult salmon survival on a per project basis is about 98 percent of listed salmon and steelhead that return through the dams.

Furthermore, NOAA Fisheries data indicates that in-river spring and summer Chinook survival has improved, so that it is now comparable to the 1960s – when there were only four dams on the lower

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Columbia and Snake rivers. Currently, 95 to 99 percent of juvenile salmon survive through the bypass and spill at many dams, and turbine passage has survival rates of 85 to 95 percent. Some say that dams must be removed to allow as many juvenile salmon as possible to reach the ocean, but these data suggest that is unnecessary.

Another thing we know about life in the river is that birds like Caspian terns and cormorants are a major cause of mortality in fish. Before management agencies implemented plans to reduce the impact of these birds, they were responsible for consuming 15 million salmonids in 1999 alone. In 2005, that number was reduced to 3.6 million. Other predators, including the northern pikeminnow consume thousands more. Some agencies actually pay people to catch these predators and thus reduce salmon losses.

We have made great strides in learning more about salmon and doing more to help them when they are in the rivers. We must continue to do that. But we need to better understand the big picture of the lifecycle of salmon. I'm not alone in saying so.

Leading marine biologists at several Northwest universities argue the region must understand ocean survival so we can understand which freshwater changes help. Then we can focus our money and efforts on areas that will yield the greatest recovery. This information can also help the region develop management actions to improve salmon survival.

One project addressing this lack of science is called Pacific Ocean Shelf Tracing (POST), which helps to measure marine and in-river salmon survival. According to noted researcher David Welch, this project installs a network of acoustic receivers off the Pacific Northwest coast and at the mouth of the Columbia River Estuary to track fish implanted with transmitters. Current tracking mechanisms stop at Bonneville Dam and don't track through the estuary or the ocean. Since we now know that the greatest impact to salmon lies in the ocean, the key is to examine the entire lifecycle, not just their trip through the hydrosystem.

We all have the same common goal – to bring the salmon back. Where people diverge is on the proposals. Some are reasonable. Some less so. We shouldn't prescribe drastic measures when we don't even know what the number one cause of salmon mortality is. So, let's abandon the frenzied rhetoric, come together, get serious and get a big picture of what impacts the salmon. The questions are tough, but the answers are out there.